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The Realm of Appearances

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Art

by
Dustin Lee Massey
December 2018

Accepted by:
Todd McDonald, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

My work references images from social media to construct a world that exists somewhere between our physical world and the digital. I do this to help me understand how our reliance on technology, and our use of social media affects how we process information. I examine the cultural implications this media saturation has had, or will have on our society. Specifically, I am looking at the “digital divide.” My work explores the divide between the way we often think and behave online, and how it differs from our offline self. This is accomplished by elevating the value of the original image through paint. Using a high key palette, I construct an image that is more synthetic than the original to emphasize the absurd nature of the original image. The synthetic image I create is done to make my world more interesting than our actual world. However, the world I am creating is also ambiguous and confusing. My paintings depict spaces that suggest an exaggerated version of reality. I use images that are heavily constructed. I then distort the image to emphasize the constructed qualities of our image world. This is done to provoke the viewer’s imagination and have them evaluate the image differently than they typically would. I am inviting them to contemplate the absurd nature of our world, and contemplate how they contribute to it’s creation.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The world is saturated with information that is unedited, torrential, pixelated, flickering, backlit, and instantaneous. Through paint I construct a world that exists somewhere between the physical and the digital. This constructed world is an exaggerated reflection of our current cultural environment. In doing so I can process and understand the cultural implications this has had, or will have, on our society. I present a reconstructed world that is variously beautiful, playful, and erotic. However, it is also a world that is weird, grotesque, confusing and ambiguous. I do this to entice the viewer's imagination and then have them examine the paintings with a critical eye. I provoke the viewer to contemplate where they fit in and consider their part in shaping this new world.

CHAPTER TWO

SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

The *Society of the Spectacle* is a critique of contemporary consumer culture and commodity fetishism written by Marxist theorist Guy Debord in 1967. Debord believed that all that was once directly lived had become mere representation in mass culture. Debord was specifically referring to the central importance of the image in contemporary society of the mid 20th Century. He believed that images had replaced genuine human interaction. He stressed that in a consumer society, social life is no longer about living, but about having. Debord believed the Spectacle is governed by corporate power structures that use images to convince people of what they need and must have. As a result, our lives move further away from a state of “having” and move into a state of just “appearing.” We no longer live, agency is removed, and we become passive. The Spectacle destroys social interactions when we live in the realm of appearances. Although it was written in the late 1960s, *The Society of the Spectacle* maps out some aspects of the 21st Century directly. America is obsessed with celebrity culture and its portrayal of freedom and fame. This portrayal suggests almost the complete opposite of life as most of us actually live. The Spectacle predicted just about everything that we consume and do; it would embody a mixture of distraction and reinforcement. That distraction and reinforcement has produced a mode of society that has taken the idea of the Spectacle to a surreal extreme. These connections prompted me to apply Debord’s writings to a more contemporary setting that now includes the digital and virtual.

The Spectacle is present in all of my work. I critique consumerism in my paintings *The Sun That Never Sets on the Empire of Modern Passivity* and *For The Love of Shoes*. I address how we receive information today in *Pink is the New Orange* and *Shallow*. *The Earth is Flat* documents political unrest that happened in Charlottesville last year. America's obsession with achieving celebrity status and voyeurism is on display in *PeekaChu* and *I Know What I Have Given You...I Don't Know What You Have Received*. The way America's overly sexualized media shapes our view of reality and gender roles is depicted in *There Will Be Blood* and *All Eyez On Me*.

CHAPTER THREE

WORLD OF IMAGES

Our reliance on technology and use of social media has resulted in the commodification of almost every aspect of life and a profound shift in social behaviors where any notion of the authentic becomes almost impossible. It does not appear that any aspect of our life is immune as this breakdown of authenticity has affected our beliefs, recent political issues and participation in widespread, momentous events. We have moved into a state of “appearing” where each image is carefully constructed. A large reason for this is our society being conditioned to need and crave attention, validation, love, and acceptance. This approval or validation is quantified by the amount of likes and/or shares each image receives. This cultural ripple effect has created an exponential growth in the amount of photos generated and the absurdity of the content. In America we create images that are meant to out perform the last images we made, in a continuous search for validation. This overabundance of images, intertwined with all aspects of our culture provides me with a wealth of information to reference.

My process for choosing images is similar to that of Martin Parr. He uses images that are of actual people or events. He focuses mainly on leisure, consumption, and communication, which are all motifs I reference in my work and in line with Debord’s

model of the Spectacle. The viewer might believe Parr has manipulated an image because it seems exaggerated. Like Parr, I take familiar imagery and present it to the viewer in a new way that prompts the viewer to think critically about our cultural peculiarities.

I choose images from social media that often have an absurd quality to them. I want the viewer to first see the image as unbelievable. However, after the viewer spends time with them they come to the realization that this could be an image of an actual person or an event that has taken place. In my painting *I Know What I Have Given You.... I Don't Know What You Have Received* a couple is engaged in a potentially offensive public display of affection on the beach. While this is taking place, one of their friends live streams the act. At first glance, the painted imagery seems to be a collage. For instance, the figure is wearing night vision goggles on the beach. The couple in the foreground is framed by a solid pink line that draws attention to them. Loud colors depict the setting the figures occupy, so that it is difficult to distinguish what is actually the beach and what is a beach towel. Unusual perspective is heightened in segmented pockets that seem to skew the perspective in many unrealistic directions. Whether or not it is an actual event does not matter. What does matter is that the viewer recognizes that we live in an environment in which they can imagine this public display actually taking place.

My familiar images are either memes or they have achieved viral status. Richard Dawkins coined the word meme in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins described that memes were original ideas that were hijacked and then altered by human activity.

Memes are important to my work because I hijack and alter an image that has already been hijacked and altered. I participate in that same process of how we assign value to these viral images, while simultaneously being critical of that process. An example of this process is how I altered the image being circulated from the Charlottesville riots the weekend the event happened. In my painting *The Earth is Flat*, I hide dinosaurs in the background using a muted palette similar to that of the background. This is done for two reasons. One is to include a visual element that is completely fantastical and surreal to communicate the idea that this event is unbelievable. The other is to use the dinosaurs as a metaphor for extinct schools of thought that still hide in plain sight amongst us.

Mosquitoes are also used in the painting to reinforce the ideas of extinct schools of thought and the fantasy realm. They reference the idea that this is a contemporary event that actually happened by indirectly connecting it to the tiki torches that participants used during the march. This reference was drawn from memes that circulated about Home Depot having a really good tiki torch sales weekend, and how there was not a mosquito in sight. The mosquitoes are also linked to the dinosaurs hidden in the background. In the movie Jurassic park, dinosaurs were created by using DNA harvested from fossilized mosquitoes. The mosquitoes also serve as a metaphor for our current political environment that has paved the way for these dinosaurs to walk amongst us once again.

CHAPTER FOUR

PAINT AS CONTENT

The images are the entry point. I digitally collage found digital images that serve as reference images for my work. Instead of using a digital medium to communicate those constructed images, I paint them. Because paint is a physical medium that communicates the digital, process is part of the content. Images on social media are typically viewed very quickly by swiping up with your index finger. When I present that same image in paint, the viewer experiences the image in a way that is contrary to how it is typically viewed. Traditionally paintings require you to spend time with them because they are dense, layered, and full of complicated relationships. Viewers connect with and relate to what they see in their own life, or to other works of art or images they have seen. The history, value, and physicality of paint assigns a higher value to the image that invites the viewer to slow down and look at the image with a critical eye.

The transformation of the world onto two-dimensional surfaces challenged my understanding of unspoken codes and symbols. In order to better understand how to

convey meaning through paint I researched artists whose visual language was different from mine, and challenged my understanding. This includes Mary Weatherford, who incorporates LED lights in her work, and Sarah Cain, who extends her paintings beyond the canvas and onto the surrounding environment. Not every artist I researched ended up influencing my work, but it opened my eyes to what was possible through paint. This research helped me to build a more diverse set of visual languages and choices to better illustrate my understanding of the world in which we live.

We inhabit a noisy environment both physically and digitally, where retailers and tech companies compete for our attention. Fractured, shifting, and unexpected pictorial spaces communicate eye-catching images that are bright and colorful. Loud colors are used to amplify the world that I create, and generate a more interesting world than the one in which we live. I use candy-colored palette choices, that like candy, are yummy and hard to resist. Although yummy and hard to resist, it can make you sick. There are parts of our absurd world that are not always visible. Saturated color draws attention to this and ensures that absurd quality is not lost.

My use of non-naturalistic color to express this world to the viewer is in line with that of the Fauves' use of color. They too used whatever colors were necessary to express an idea, emotion, or a feeling. In the painting painting *Le Bonheur de Vivre*, Henri Matisse used bright colors and undulating lines to pull our eye through an idealized scene. His use of color encourages the viewer to imagine feeling the warmth of the sun, the cool of the grass, and the caress of a touch. The Fauves believed color had a spiritual quality that linked directly to our emotions, and they used it at the highest possible pitch.

The Fauves were the first in a long line of painters to use high key color to convey a mood or express a feeling.

In order to find solutions to problems I was trying to solve, I looked to other contemporary artists who were using color in similar ways. Bartoz Beda has been by far my biggest influence on this body of work. His works are very painterly, and multilayered. Images and edges dissolve into each other. He allows saturated color to just sit on the surface to help enhance the space. All of Beda's formal decisions combine to convey mood in his works. The atmospheric pink cloud used to depict the crowd in *For The Love of Shoes* was inspired by the formal choices he made in his series of paintings *Ten Starts From One*. My latest paintings are influenced by Otto Ford. Evidence of this can be found in my painting *Shallow*. The pool toys and parts of the figures are painted juxtaposing warm and cool high key colors so they vibrate and operate just as abstract line and shape.

I use acrylic paint, because it is a synthetic polymer, often associated with the fake. Another example of this material would be acrylic fibers that are used to produce artificial wool. One of the most common uses of acrylic is fake acrylic fingernails. Having "nice" nails itself is a socially constructed beauty standard. I construct a reality that is representing the artificial nature of our world. The synthetic quality of acrylic paint speaks to the artificial. The artificial is front and center in my painting *For The Love of Shoes*. The painting is a critique of consumerism and how our clothing choices become costumes. These costumes are often meant to visually project to others what we want them to know about us. I present the viewer with the experience of what it is like to

shop in the mall and pick out these outfits. To convey this feeling, I make the space in the distance dark and the storefronts very bright and vibrant. Paint is used to create the mood shoppers associate with typical mall lighting. Greens and blues are used to replicate the artificial light experienced while shopping in a typical mall. Flat circles of intense yellows and oranges sit on the surface of the canvas to replicate the feeling of being surrounded by glass. The mass of people waiting in line to check out dissolves into a pink atmospheric cloud to convey a feeling of confusion. This confusion represents the overwhelming feeling of fighting through never-ending crowds at the mall. These formal decisions in combination with each other replicate the feeling of a typical mall setting.

My work relates to Warhol and Pop art because of my critique of capitalism and interest in popular culture. However, his participation in the high versus low argument influences how I choose to depict images. Pop art emerged as an important new stage in the breakdown of high art versus low art. Instead of embracing the pre-existing order of fine arts, Warhol helped transform it by bridging the gap between the avant-garde and the public. His goal was to make sure that everyone, not just the elite and educated, could become the audience of his work. His dive into pop art was supposed to be accessible for everyone.

I also participate in that dialogue, because the images I use typically have low value. This low value is in part due to the fact that they are accessible to everyone. The introduction of smart phones has resulted in the exponential growth of images that are created each day. In 2014, according to Mary Meeker's annual Internet Trends report, people uploaded an average of 1.8 billion digital images every single day. The content of

the images being uploaded also affects their value. Social media is flooded with the banal details of every event in life. The same themes are repeated over and over again across all social media platforms. The image and its content have lost their impact due to over saturation. I take that same image and I elevate it by conveying its meaning through paint and presenting it to the viewer in a way in which they are not accustomed.

All Eyez on Me is an example of this. The source image of two elderly white men, displaying an outsized and unwarranted confidence, shows them proudly posing on the beach. To enhance the absurd nature of the image, I depicted their bodies in patchy blocks. These blocks enhanced and brought attention to their imperfections. Through paint I provide evidence of cellulite, sunburn, and the patchy use of self-tanner. And yet, they still display confidence through their body language and stance. I did not want to rely on that alone, but enhanced their narcissistic tendencies through collage and color choices. I collaged American flag speedos and a watermelon float onto them to amplify the absurd quality of the image. I then used thick saturated pink paint to frame the figures to draw attention to them. This framing ensures they are on display for everyone to see and the sole focus of the image. I have amplified their confidence and willingness, and desire for the viewer to gaze upon them.

CHAPTER FIVE

A BRAVE NEW WORLD

My paintings depict spaces that suggest an exaggerated version of reality. I use images that are heavily constructed. I then distort the image to emphasize the constructed qualities. The images I create are either an actual space, or one that exists somewhere between the physical and the digital. The space in my paintings is often ambiguous to reinforce the idea that looking is not always knowing. We are gradually assimilated into this new environment, and as a result, we may not notice the impact it has on our society. This exaggerated reality is used to amplify our world and draw attention to it.

Fractured space can create spatial and temporal confusion in order to highlight the fast-paced world in which we live. My painting *The Sun That Never Sets on the Empire*

of Modern Passivity includes this kind of space. I depict a series of fleeting events happening at the same location at the same time by layering different images on top of each other. I layer images of different iPhone product launches on top of each other. The act of waiting in line for a new phone is mundane; however, our world is complex, ambiguous, and constantly being altered and shaped by these new product launches. To communicate the underlying energy of these events and how they reshape our environment, I rupture the space with two beams of light that stretch horizontally all the way across the canvas. The painting is a critique of technology and consumer culture. Technology changes our shopping habits as more people move exclusively to making all of their purchases online. I depict this changing landscape by turning parts of the environment into Amazon packages. The facial features of the figures waiting in line have been replaced with parts of the Amazon logo.

Another strategy involves layering and collaging two different spaces on top of each other as seen in *Pink is the New Orange*. Screens fracture and saturate the painted space to reflect how we receive information. The figures run through the space to communicate the idea that we are running at a pace we cannot keep up. We cannot absorb and process the information, only react, because of the rate at which we receive it. The canvas is fractured in vertical stripes to give the feeling of Venetian blinds. This is to communicate the idea that you want to block out the information but cannot. Fragmented space to communicate how rapidly advancing technology is affecting our world is similar to the efforts of the Cubists. They too found themselves in a time period that was affected by a huge jump in technology. To depict this new dynamic vision of

life during their time, they also used fractured space. Like the Cubists, my work represents time, motion, and space that captures a fleeting moment.

There Will Be Blood is one painting in a series of paintings I completed about children trying to navigate our complicated image world without guidance. Eric Fischl's work has had a strong influence on me, both in terms of his content and how he paints. His early work was about the rift between what was experienced and what was not said. This prompted me to think about how we live in a time where everything is lived and said. I cannot begin to understand what it is like to grow up in a world that has never not known the internet. However, I imagine it can be overwhelming and difficult to process. To illustrate this overwhelming feeling I create an environment that is full of confusing and ambiguous space relationships. I give you a hint of the figure ground relationship and create the illusion of space by using linear perspective in most of the paintings. I want to ground the children and give you hints that they are occupying an actual physical space. However, I also want the space to be confusing. The images are about children learning about a larger world before they are ready. The space is meant to be confusing for several different reasons. Abstracted forms are used to communicate the idea that their brains have not fully developed. As a result, they are incapable of understanding the world around them as adults do. The abstracted world is supposed to represent this new world they cannot comprehend and this is how it appears visually to them in the world that I constructed. When I reference children entering a larger world before they are ready, I am referring to social media and being exposed to information that is not age

appropriate. Even as adults, the rate at which we receive information is overwhelming. Oftentimes we are also subjected to information that we would not willingly seek out on our own. The abstraction is not only meant to illustrate the idea that they are not mature enough to understand it, but also the idea that they are receiving information too quickly to process it properly. What they can understand and process is broken down into simplified shapes in the paintings, such as toys.

This series of paintings also prompted me to investigate blurring the line between the physical and the digital, not just metaphorically, but literally. The digital program Procreate became an integral part of my process. I edit images digitally in Procreate, and then I paint them. I will then import the painting back into Procreate and experiment with my painting digitally. Once I am happy with a decision I have made, I then physically paint it. This process that exists somewhere between the physical and the digital reflects the world I construct for the viewer. In paintings like *Shallow*, I make sure the viewer is aware of the link to the digital by recreating the digital erase mark in paint. I layer two images on top of each other and then digitally erase part of Image 1 to allow Image 2 to come through. I then paint this and manipulate the space through the use of color. Different parts of those two images come forward or recede into space. I did this to create an ambiguous, confusing space that surrounded and engulfed the children in an invasive way.

CHAPTER SIX

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

My work is not about the integration of the digital world into the physical one, but more of a digital divide. I look at the divide between our digital self—how we often think and behave online, and our offline self—how we often think and behave in face-to-face interactions. I explore how we behave in the digital space and how it can inform our behavior in the physical world. This is accomplished by having my figures represent

different types of social conditions that are magnified because of our use of social media. I specifically focus on anonymity, consumption, narcissism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, and objectification in my work.

Anonymity online often leads to a loosening of social restrictions that would otherwise be present in physical interactions. Anonymity can lead to people feeling less accountable for their actions. They are also not concerned with how others evaluate them. We have recently witnessed events where these behaviors were mirrored in the physical world. My painting *The Earth is Flat* is about crowd situations where people no longer operate independently but share a “group mind.” Shared responsibility reduces self-awareness. To express the mob mentality, I represent figures that are robbed of individuality. The figures are layered on top of each other and dissolve into each other and the background. This push and pull where the figures exist creates spatial confusion. I simulate the lost-in-the-crowd effect. The figures that are visible are depicted in a way that they become exaggerated caricatures of themselves. This is done to draw attention to the absurd event that is taking place.

Children grow up in a complex environment where television, marketing ads, social media, and teen culture are all intertwined. This media is hyper-sexualized and provides us with resources for constructing and expressing our identities. This mediated world shapes our view of reality and how we interpret gender roles and our relationships. In most societies, gender is viewed as power and creates inequality. This inequality is reiterated within our constructed media. As a result, American media disproportionately appeals to a normative male viewer. The female figure is significantly more likely to be

represented as attractive and provocatively dressed. Women are objectified and valued only for beauty and sexuality. Unlike men, who are represented in media as “doing,” women are represented as just “being” in the public sphere.

There Will Be Blood is about a young boy trying to navigate our complex environment of media saturation. It is one painting in a series where we follow a boy as he is shaped by the hyper-sexualized media. I use female mannequins because they are closely associated with construction. They are used to present the ideal body image, which is also a construct. This ideal woman is what he is expected to find desirable, according to expectations set by our media and society in general. A lack of facial features deprives mannequins of individuality. This is done to show that the boy, influenced by the media, is participating in the construction of what he thinks a female should be.

I use caution when criticizing America’s overly sexualized media, because I do not want to be mistaken for perpetuating media’s objectification of women. This is accomplished by creating a more synthetic image that is uncomfortable to look upon. The reason for this is to make objectification disturbing and highlight the unpleasant, grotesque environment in which we live. To create this feeling, I do not use a naturalistic palette to represent the figures or the environment in my paintings. In *I Know What I Have Given You... I Don’t Know What You Have Received*, I chip away at the sensual nature of the figures by how I choose to depict them. Instead of representing them the way they appear in the original image, I distort the figures. The anatomy is not accurate. Smooth soft lines are replaced with jagged, hard edges. The figures are framed with

thick saturated pink lines to draw attention to them. All of these formal choices are done to emphasize the constructed nature of sexualized images that the media showcases. As my research developed, I also found it necessary to use images that depicted both the male and female engaged with each other. I wanted the female form represented to be equal to the male. I actually represent the female figures as more aggressive in my last three paintings to be a symbolic representation of their sexual independence. I did not use images of females by themselves, because it lends itself to the normative male gaze and participation of objectification.

The false reality created by images influences the lives and beliefs of others. People with narcissistic tendencies love to present themselves to other people in search of approval. Social networks like Facebook are an ideal platform for these people. The digital network provides them easy access to a large audience that allows them to selectively post information for the purpose of self-promotion. They meticulously cultivate their image to put forth the “best” version of themselves.

The link between narcissism and social media promotes exhibitionism. Paranoia of panoptical regimes is being replaced by the productive exhibition of the private. No longer is panoptic surveillance viewed as a threat. Today it is looked upon as an opportunity to display oneself under the gaze of the camera for the purposes of self-promotion. Many of my paintings participate in the dialogue of the public versus the private—specifically, public acts that should most likely remain private. *PeekaChu* depicts a half-naked couple posing for a picture that their son is taking for them while dressed up as *Pickachu*. They are sexualized to tempt the viewer and invite them into

their private space. The viewer judges the behavior and questions their decision to invite the public into their private space. After spending time with the painting, the viewer realizes they are the *Pickachu* baby. The viewer is implicated because they are participating in the behavior. It is done to not only highlight exhibitionism but also America's obsession with voyeurism.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

As I researched this topic and created paintings, the way I processed information did in fact change. My greatest take-away from my research was how my work evolved. Both writing about the work and physically creating paintings altered and informed how I made, and will make, future decisions. My early works in graduate school tended to use illustration in literal depictions of scenarios that relied on humor or novelty for impact. Through the process of making paintings, I discovered that I could convey meaning through paint. My formal choices such as line, color, and mark making could amplify and enhance a narrative to help communicate that idea more effectively. Becoming aware of this prompted me to investigate a more complex use of color. I researched different artists' visual languages that they used to expand my own toolbox for conveying meaning. The space in my images became more complex and ambiguous. I discovered it was not enough to just show the viewer what a space looked like. I realized that through compositional choices, varying visual languages and color, I could convey a mood that informed the viewer what it felt like to actually be present in that space.

The most important piece of knowledge that I took away from this research was to never present an image the way it is typically viewed. My early works were flat and one-dimensional. They read very quickly and did not provoke the viewer to spend time with them. I learned that each formal decision I made provided an opportunity to make my image multilayered and dense and to provide the viewer with a wealth of information to unpack. I discovered just how much was involved, or at stake, in the construction of an image. Trying to reflect and comprehend the world through what we see, and not through what one has to say with words, engages the mind in a more powerful way. This

I will take with me and continue to apply throughout the rest of my painting career. If I remember to live by this rule, I will always challenge myself to experiment with paint and discover new ways it can convey meaning.



Fig. 1: *All Eyez on Me*

Acrylic on canvas, 24"x30"x1.5", 2018

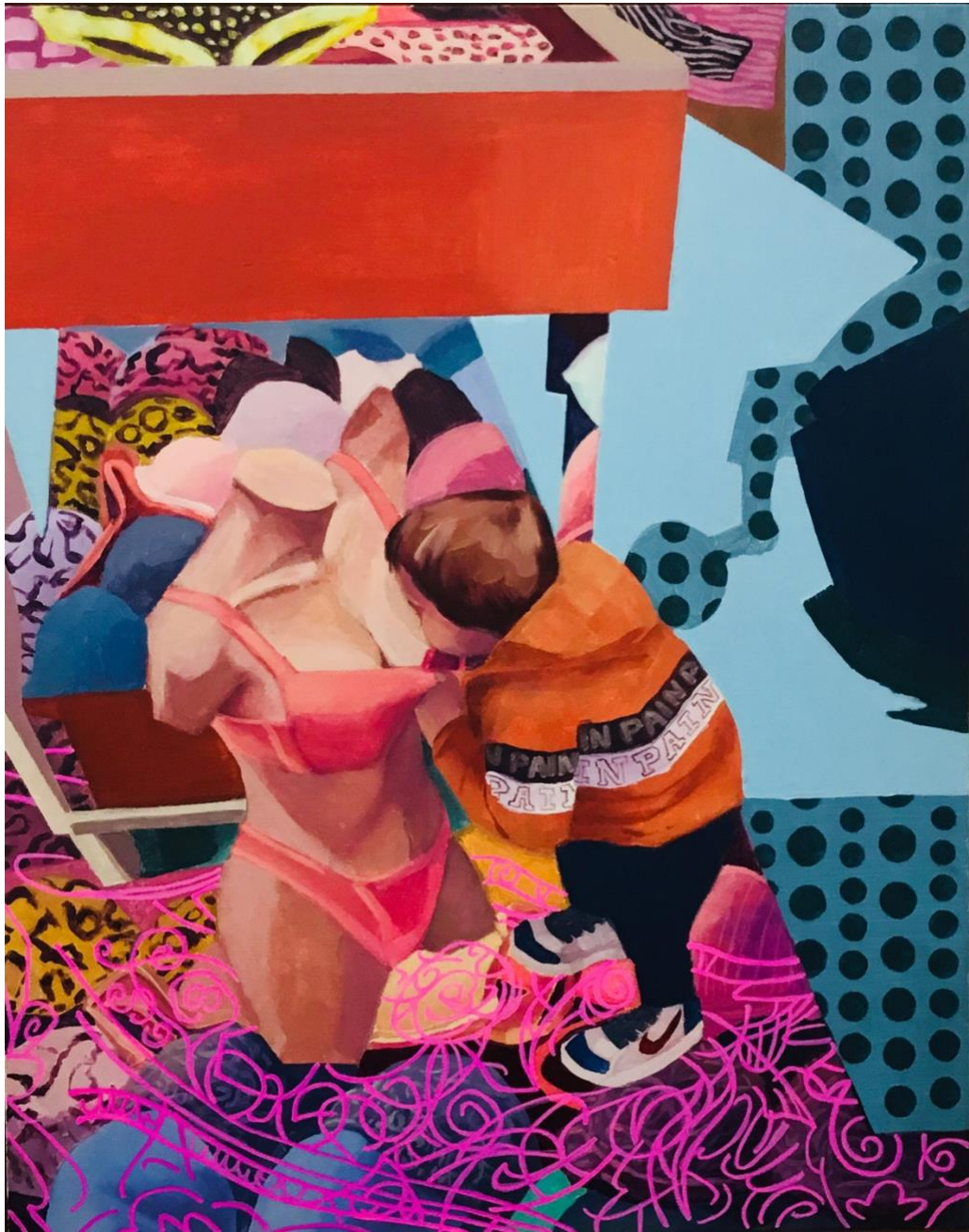


Fig. 2: *There Will Be Blood*

Mixed media on canvas, 30"x24"x1.5", 2018



Fig. 3: *I Know What I Have Given You....I Don't Know What You Have Received*

Acrylic on canvas, 30"x40"x1.5", 2018



Fig. 4: *Untitled I*

Acrylic on canvas, 24"x30"x1.5", 2018



Fig. 5: *Shallow*

Mixed media on canvas, 30"x40"x1.5", 2018



Fig. 6: *Pink Is The New Orange*

Mixed media on canvas, 30"x48"x1.5", 2017



Fig. 7: *PeekaChu!*

Acrylic on canvas, 36"x48"x1.5", 2016



Fig. 8: *The Earth is Flat*

Mixed media on canvas, 30"x48"x1.5", 2017



Fig. 9: *For The Love of Shoes*

Mixed media on canvas, 36"x36"x1.5", 2017



Fig. 10: *The Sun That Never Sets on the Empire of Modern Passivity*

Acrylic on canvas, 24"x48"x1.5", 2017

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